PICTURING RUSSIAN EMPIRE

EDITED BY

Valerie Kivelson

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Sergei Kozlov

UNIVERSITY OF TYUMEN

Joan Neuberger

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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CHAPTER 6

VISUAL POLEMICS: THE TIME OF TROUBLES IN POLISH AND RUSSIAN HISTORICAL MEMORY (1611–1949)

EKATERINA BOLTUNOVA

IN 1730, a new book describing Warsaw and its environs was published in Dresden. Its author was Christian Erndtel, a botanist, meteorologist, and physician to Augustus II, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony. The book mostly covered Erndtel's research interests: the geography and botany of lands adjacent to the capital of Poland. However, history was featured there, too, and often appeared as a fascinating adventure story. In his section on the Warsaw castle, the royal physician describes the rich collection of paintings preserved there and mentions that the royal chambers once had two paintings by "Dolabella, the famous Italian painter: one showing the capture of Smolensk and the public act whereby . . . the famous Polish commander, Hetman (military commander) Zolkiewius, in the presence of senators, handed. . . . the imprisoned Grand Prince of Muscovy to the king (Sigismund III)." With a degree of sadness, the physician mentioned that the other painting "was taken by Tsar Peter of Russia . . . to Muscovy." Erndtel led readers to believe that this masterpiece was lost. He also mentioned that Peter "wanted to get rid of" the Sigismund III column, a monument to the victorious seventeenth-century king that had been erected in front of the Warsaw castle. Erndtel reported it was only the "tireless campaign that several senators led against this threat of desecration" that ultimately prevented the Tsar from destroying it.[1]

Erndtel got his facts right, except for one detail. In the late 1700s and early 1710s, Augustus II gave the Emperor of Russia not one, but both of the paintings he mentions. In terms of historical significance, his mistake was understandable: the painting the physician describes—Dolabella's *Stanisław Żółkiewski Brings the Captured Shuisky Kings to King Sigismund and Prince Władysław at the 1611 Sejm*—was the one that mattered. It left a significant mark on the Polish national memory, and it is the focus of this article (Image 6.1).

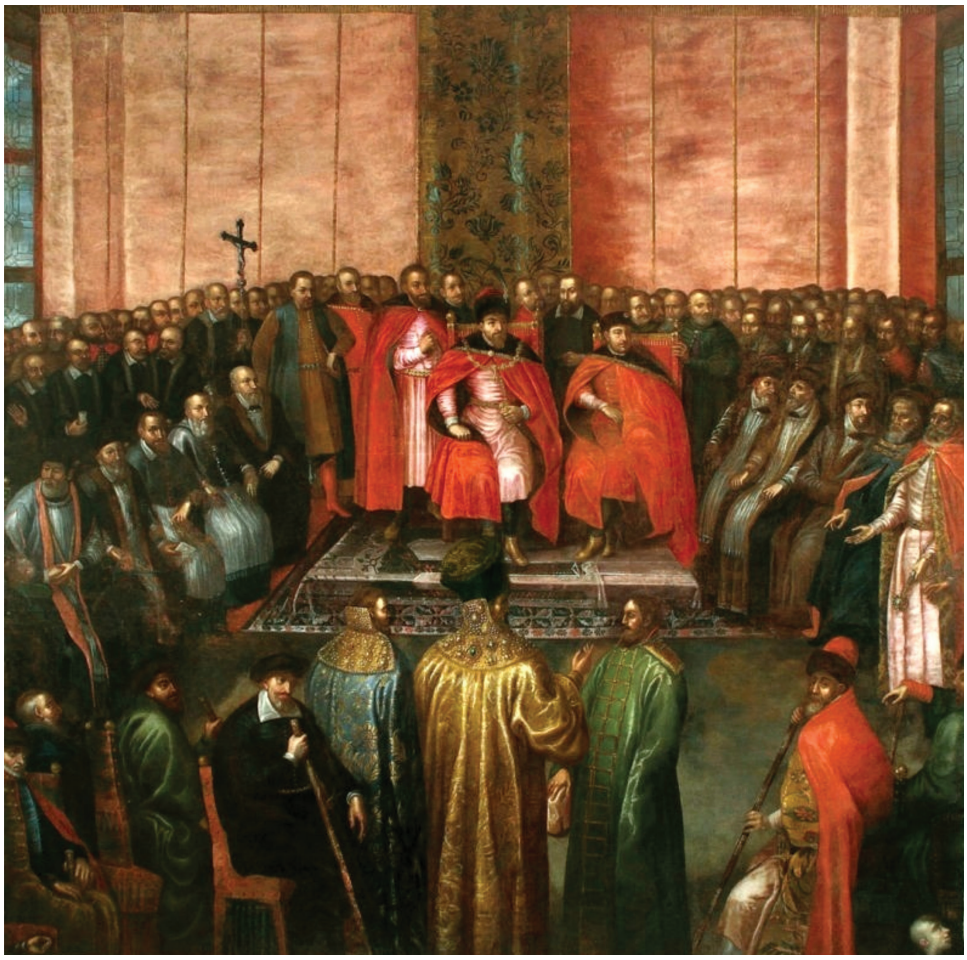

IMAGE 6.1 Tommaso Dolabella, *Stanisław Żółkiewski Brings the Captured Shuisky Kings to King Sigismund and Prince Władysław at the 1611 Sejm*, after 1611.

The new owner of the two historical paintings, Peter the Great of Russia, had a wide reputation as a collector of art and curios. A passionate man, he never failed to acquire an object he desired via a diplomatic gift or mutually profitable exchange, or simply by purchasing the item he craved. Yet Peter's reason for owning Dolabella's paintings was not their artistic merit. Peter never planned to feature them in his collection. By demanding that his Polish ally, Augustus II, hand over these pictures, Peter was serving an altogether different agenda, a strategic one. His goal was to subvert the Polish version of the historical past. King Augustus, dependent as he was on Peter's military support, could do nothing to prevent the tsar's effort to recast a key moment in Russian-Polish relations, the Time of Troubles, a century earlier.

The Time of Troubles was a prolonged political crisis that engulfed Russia at the beginning of the seventeenth century and culminated in massive military intervention by Poland and Sweden. The almost two decades of political instability and warfare (1598–1613) ended in the expulsion of the invaders by an all-Russian volunteer army and the rise of a new dynasty on the Russian throne, the Romanovs. During the crisis, the plan to invade Russia and seize political power was promoted by Sigismund III Vasa, the King of Poland. His military campaign led to the occupation of Moscow by the Polish army in 1610 and the election of his son Władysław as Tsar of Russia by a council of Russian aristocrats.

Tommaso Dolabella's painting, the one Christian Erndtel mentioned, depicted the humiliating aftermath of Russia's defeat. The dethroned Tsar Vasily Shuisky, together with his brothers, was handed over to Hetman Stanisław Żółkiewski, one of leaders of the Polish armed forces, who brought them to Poland. On October 29, 1611, in the capital city of Warsaw, the Shuisky brothers were forced to pledge allegiance to their former adversary, the King of Poland.

The ritual of surrender was staged in the most magnificent style. The oath swearing was elaborated down to the minutest detail, and all key members of the aristocratic elites took part. The nineteenth-century Russian historian Sergei Solovyov described the ceremony as follows:

> When the three Shuiskys were brought before the king [Sigismund III], they made a low bow, with their hats in their hands. Żółkiewski started a long speech on the mutability of fortune and glorified the king and his military feats, the capture of Smolensk and Moscow. He talked of the power of the Moscow tsars, the last of whom was now bowing before the King of Poland. At these words, Vasily took a deep bow, touched the ground with his right hand and kissed the king's hand. The second brother, Dmitry, bowed to the ground, and the third, Ivan, took three deep bows and started crying. The hetman continued his speech, saying that he was transferring the Shuiskys to the power of the king not as prisoners, but for the sake of human happiness and asked [him] to treat them kindly. The three brothers took another deep bow in silence. When the hetman ended his speech, the Shuiskys were allowed to kiss the royal hand. It was a grand, surprising, and pitiful spectacle, as contemporaries described it.[2]

The Shuiskys were then imprisoned in the Gostyn Castle, where they were kept in dire conditions. Vasily and his brother Dmitry soon died and were buried in the castle. The historian Ruslan Skrynnikov believed that the brothers might have been murdered and that their original burial place was underneath the castle gate.[3] If the latter was true, it was undeniably a form of symbolic humiliation of the former tsar.

The painting Peter the Great took to Moscow is now presumed lost, or maybe even intentionally destroyed. However, a copy that has survived among the collections of the Lviv Historical Museum can shed some light on what might have

offended the Russian emperor enough to destroy it. In the center of the painting, we see Sigismund III and Prince Władysław towering over the dais. Although it was the son who was elected Tsar of Russia, the key figure is undeniably the father. Given that the thrones are of roughly equal height, he tops Władysław by half a head. They are dressed in ceremonial red, one of the Polish national colors, and thus easily stand out from the crowd. Sigismund and Władysław are shown listening to Żółkiewski's speech, the hetman appearing on the right side, draped in a red cloak and wielding a mace of power. All around the royal dais stand members of the Polish aristocracy, indicating the high status of the event.

The Shuisky brothers, who appear at the bottom of the canvas, also impress the viewer. Vasily, Dmitry, and Ivan are wearing rich and colorful *kaftans* (robes), with long sleeves in the old Moscow fashion and very high collars of a special design. It is clear that the artist took pains to show the intricate details, such as the ornament on the *kaftans* and the gemstones sewn onto the collars. The central figure must be Tsar Vasily, the tallest of the three people taking the oath of allegiance, and the one wearing the brightest and the richest clothes of gold color, with the big fur hat on his head. He is the only man in the painting turned away from the viewers. The Shuiskys form a clear opposition to the Polish aristocracy in the painting, with their clothes in stark contrast to the ceremonial robes worn by Sigismund, Władysław, Żółkiewski, and other Poles. The exotic manner Dolabella used to portray the Shuisky brothers is quite conspicuous and employed with the clear purpose of marking their belonging to a different cultural sphere.

This visual reminder of the humiliating oath sworn by Tsar Vasily Shuisky hung in a public chamber of the Warsaw castle. The painting must have left a deep impression on Peter the Great. Given that several generations of his ancestors had been at work to erase the memory of Polish victories over Moscow, this effect is unsurprising.

Efforts to shape historical memory played out actively in both Russia and Poland after the Time of Troubles. By the end of the 1610s, Polish dreams of exerting political power over Muscovy were growing increasingly unrealistic, while the need for symbolic fashioning of past Polish victories was becoming increasingly urgent. The Polish court staged celebrations commemorating military victories over Muscovy in addition to the capture and humiliation of the Shuisky brothers. In 1620, Sigismund III ordered the construction of what is known as the Moscow Chapel to hold the remains of the Shuiskys. The brothers' bodies were transferred to this new chapel, built to perpetuate the glorious memory of the king's triumph over Russia. The marble slab placed at the entrance had a Latin inscription glorifying Sigismund as a commander who "accepted the surrender of the capital city of Moscow" and who took prisoner "by right of war" Muscovite leaders (i.e., Shuisky and his brothers) who had "ruled unlawfully."[4] The chapel soon became a notable site and appeared on many maps of Warsaw from this period.

Almost two and a half decades later, a monument was erected in front of the Warsaw castle by order of King Władysław. This monument was the Sigismund III

column, topped by a statue of the Polish king, in armor, leaning on a cross and wielding a saber. The western side of the pedestal featured an inscription in Latin listing the feats of the monarch: "Sigismund III, freely elected King of Poland and ancestral King of Sweden, the first among kings in his love of peace and glory, yielding to no one in war and victory, [who] captured the leaders of Muscovy, its capital and lands, defeated their armies, restored power over Smolensk . . . , reigned for 44 years, the 44th king, equal in glory to all [his predecessors] and fully glorified" (Image 6.2).

In the seventeenth century, Russian and Polish versions of historical memory of the Time of Troubles were in vigorous competition. In Russia, the first Romanovs opposed the Polish interpretation of the events and sought to dismantle the triumphant anti-Moscow commemorative landscape of Warsaw. The first of the Romanov tsars, Michael, succeeded in his demand to have the remains of the Shuiskys returned to Moscow, after which Vasily was reburied yet again, this time in the Cathedral of the Archangel, among the family tombs of Russian rulers. The tsar himself took part in the lavish funeral, and Vasily's new tombstone featured an epitaph describing his life and his death in Poland, as well as the final return of his body. Not a whit less active was Michael's son and successor, Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (Peter the Great's father). He demanded that the Poles take down the marble slab describing the humiliation of the Shuiskys and send it to Russia.

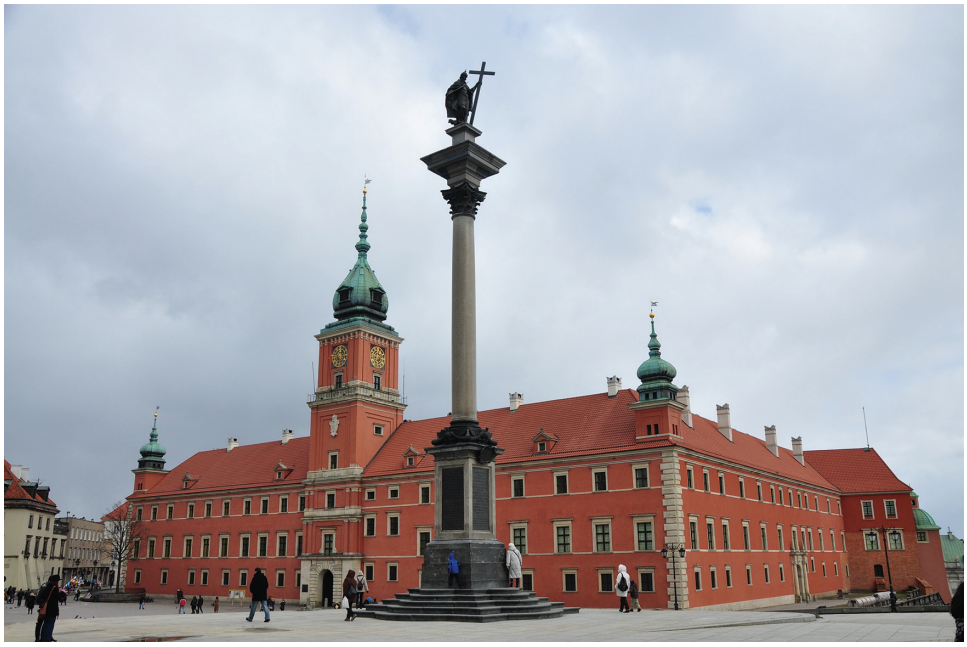

IMAGE 6.2 Sigismund III column, erected in 1644, rebuilt 1949.

The arrival of Peter the Great in Warsaw in the late 1700s marked a new stage in reworking the historical narrative. Peter is usually remembered as a figure who made a radical break with the Muscovite past, but his view of the history of Russian-Polish opposition was no different from those of his father and grandfather. His response to Dolabella's paintings shows that Peter the Great shared his predecessors' understanding of the Time of Troubles and openly worked to dismantle the Poles' competing vision.

Peter's efforts to reshape historical memory had to be carried out abroad, where his influence had its limits when Poland was still an independent state. How did the situation change after Russia annexed a part of Polish lands in the late eighteenth century, or, for that matter, when a nominally autonomous Kingdom of Poland (Congress Poland) was set up as part of the Russian Empire in the early nineteenth century? Did the Russian authorities try to completely erase the Polish interpretation of the Time of Troubles and promote the Russian national version of history in the Polish territories they had come to rule? And how were all of these processes influenced by the experience of interacting with the visual images of the past?

We must start by saying that the beginning of the nineteenth century marked a radical change in Russia's approach to Poland. Though stripped of its independence, Poland was still seen as an autonomous political entity. The recognition of these lands in 1815 as the Kingdom of Poland, with its own Constitutional Charter, within the Russian Empire had no precedent in terms of legal formalities. The coronation of Russian emperor Nicholas I as King of Poland in 1829 revealed a significant shift in Russian policy. Traveling to Warsaw for the ceremony, the Russian monarch found himself in the very space that symbolically marked the triumph of Poland over Moscow during the Time of Troubles (as Peter the Great had a century before). Unlike his ancestor, however, Nicholas did not attempt to destroy or symbolically recode this site. On the contrary, he made it his choice location for the coronation, which demonstrated his aim to achieve a political compromise. The ceremony took place in the Warsaw castle, and more specifically, in the same hall where the Shuiskys were forced to pledge allegiance to the King of Poland in 1611. When reciting the prayer, Nicholas knelt in front of the members of the Polish Parliament (*Sejm*) and Roman Catholic clergy who gathered in the hall, as the Shuiskys had done two centuries earlier. Polish subjects of the Russian emperor read this remarkable event (a Russian emperor voluntarily bowing before Polish elites!) through the lens of early seventeenth-century history, as their memoirs and other texts attest. In 1830, for example, Adam Gurowski, a Polish political writer, spoke in front of a huge crowd protesting Russian rule over Poland. Standing at the Sigismund III column and calling for overthrowing Nicholas I, he reminded his audience that they were gathered at the castle where "the Russian tsars were humiliated by Sigismund."[5] Two years later, the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, in his piece "The Redoubt of Ordon," called the Russian emperor "Vasily's son."[6] Undeniably, the coronation served to solidify the Poles' belief in their own significance.

In early nineteenth-century Russia, interest in the events of the Time of Troubles was exceptionally high. A new stage in shaping the historical memory of these events was starting, as can be seen from the publication of Nikolai Karamzin's *History of the Russian State* (1818–1829) or Alexander Pushkin's historical play *Boris Godunov* (1831). Another contributing factor was the unveiling of the famous monument (by Ivan Martos) to Kuzma Minin and Dmitry Pozharsky, heroes of the Russian resistance to the Poles during the Time of Troubles, in Moscow's Red Square in 1818. Sources show that Emperor Nicholas I himself took active interest in the history of seventeenth-century Russia and knew the events of the Time of Troubles quite well.

Despite this boom in patriotic commemoration of the Time of Troubles within Russia, official policy in Russian-dominated Poland adopted a tolerant strategy toward the Warsaw monuments. By ignoring rather than protesting the Polish commemorative topography of victories over Muscovy, Russia formed a political strategy of its own: submerging the memory of all previous wars and clashes between the two realms. It was this strategy, fostering a narrative that stressed historical amity between the two realms, that Russia was trying to bring to life in Poland.

This new political program soon led to the coexistence of two competing versions of history within the empire. The Polish interpretation was never officially prohibited (and was thus *de facto* sanctioned by the imperial authorities). For the moment, the Russian Empire granted Poland the right to shape its own national memory. And in the Polish historical narrative, the oath sworn by the Shuiskys was seen as a unifying symbolic event, or *lieu de mémoire* (locus of memory), to use Pierre Nora's term.[7]

Remarkably, this symbolic unification was powered by the visual. As time went by, visualization grew increasingly radical. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Polish painters followed Dolabella's formula—that is, they chose not to stress the Muscovites' humiliation. They showed them as standing erect rather than kneeling. With their ornate garb, they were shown as symbolically comparable to "barbarians" of the East, but their status as rulers was not denied. In this period, painters showed the Shuiskys appearing before the King and *Sejm* as conquered but not broken, standing with their heads bowed but not begging for mercy. In the latter 1820s and 1830s, however, after a shift in Russian policy toward Poland, the focus changes significantly. Polish artists Józef Peszka and Jan Kanty Szwedkowski show the Shuisky brothers genuflecting or even prostrate before Sigismund III. Peszka paints the main symbol of the dethroned power—the crown—being placed at the feet of the King of Poland.

The strategy of imperial erasure of past hostilities was adopted again over a century later in the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. In 1949, the capital of the Polish Republic, a state within the Soviet control zone, saw the reconstruction of the Sigismund III column, which had been destroyed by the Nazi occupiers during World War II. The column was ultimately restored in its original shape, with the inscription on the western side of the pedestal telling the story of the great king Sigismund, the capture of Vasily Shuisky, and the Polish occupation of Moscow. The restored Warsaw

castle featured a great hall with paintings from 1892 by Jan Matejko, including one where Tsar Vasily Shuisky of Moscow is shown kneeling before the King of Poland. The Kremlin, often seen as totally in control of every aspect of power, evidently had nothing against the restoration of this paradigm of history, hostile to Moscow though it seemed to be.[8]

NOTES

1. Christian H. Erndtel, *Warsavia physice illustrata* (Dresdae, 1730) 22.
2. Sergei Solov'ev, *Sochineniia v 18 tomakh*. Vol. 8 (Moscow: Mysl', 1989), 623.
3. Ruslan Skrynnikov, *Vasilii Shuiskii* (Moscow: AST, 2006), 381–382.
4. *Russkaia starina*, Vol. 65, St. Petersburg, 1890, 91–92.
5. *Kurjer Warszawski*, 1831, no. 26. S. 134.
6. Adam Mickiewicz, *Izbrannie proizvedeniia v 2 tomakh*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Gosdarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury. 1955), 256.
7. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
8. The book chapter was prepared within the framework of the Higher School of Economics University Basic Research Program.